Venturing beyond recorded lectures: Using podcasting to give a voice to learners in higher education

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Introduction

Web logs or *blogs* continue to grow in popularity as tools for enhancing learning and teaching. Educators create blogs for purposes ranging from providing instructional content and study hints, to disseminating course-related information and extra-curricular material. Learners also benefit from creating their own blogs, be they for use as collaborative groupware tools, online learning portfolios and reflective journals, or simply as "soapboxes" for personal self-expression. At the same time, *RDF Site Summary* (RSS — also *Rich Site Summary*, *Really Simple Syndication*) is revolutionising the way we view web-based information, in particular dynamic content. RSS-enabled web sites generate a feed of XML data summarising the content of the site, which may be anything as diverse as news stories, weather and stock market data, community-specific announcements and discussion board postings. Programs called aggregators periodically poll one or more subscribed feeds for updates and deliver or "syndicate" them to the user's desktop. RSS content can be filtered based on user-defined criteria, and content can be aggregated from across multiple feeds to suit the specific needs and interests of the user. RSS promises to be a time saver as the user does not have to manually plough through a plethora of sites for relevant content; nor is there a need for the even more tedious process of continually monitoring sites for updates.

Most blog software allows the author to syndicate content via RSS. Many such systems now also come with built-in *podcasting* features, or can be modified relatively easily to incorporate these capabilities. The term "podcast" itself was coined from the iPod, Apple's popular portable music player. Podcasts may be thought of as web-syndicated radio broadcasts – Audio content, usually in MPEG Layer 3 (MP3) format, from one or more user-selected feeds (channels) is automatically downloaded to one's computer as it becomes available via RSS, then later transferred to an iPod or other digital media player, to be listened to at a time and place convenient to the owner. Users who do not have access to a portable player can simply listen to the content on their PCs. Given the growing popularity and success of blogs and RSS in education, podcasting — which is essentially an audio form of these technologies — has a myriad of possible applications in this field. It is likely to be a powerful addition to the educational technology "toolkit", given the large uptake of desktop multimedia resources by educators and teaching institutions, in addition to the widespread proliferation of MP3 players and other portable devices amongst students.

Whilst many existing educational uses of podcasting focus on the use of this technology to deliver instructional content such as lectures, the researchers believe the true potential of this technology lies in its community-building value, and its use as a vehicle for disseminating learner-generated content. For example, a pilot study at Charles Sturt University seeks to examine how short, student-produced 3 to 5 minute talkback radio-style podcasts, can be used to address the preconceptions and anxiety that other students bring into the university classroom (Chan & Lee, 2005). Furthermore, on-campus University students are often required to deliver oral presentations during face-to-face classes; this may form part of the assessable component of a course. Podcasting provides a means to extend such learning and assessment activities to distance education students, by allowing them to record and share their presentations with their classmates over the Internet. The presentations can then be subject to peer and self-evaluation, using blogs or discussion boards to further enhance the collaborative learning experience.

References

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